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## Modern Shakespeare criticism: a pattern in the carpet

Some of the richest harvest of criticism in our 'age of criticism' has been gathered in the field of Shakespeare commentary. Modern Shakespeare criticism constitutes the most impressive and substantial part of the whole body of Shakespeare criticism through the centuries. In its range and depth, in its multiplicity of approaches and methods, modern Shakespeare criticism shows great complexity and sophistication, and uses speculative instruments drawn from different branches of knowledge. Not only does the literary criticism of the age find its true image in its Shakespeare criticism; creative literature, indeed the entire intellectual and cultural spirit of the age is also reflected there. If modern literary criticism consists of a number of schools using conflicting modes of approach to the study of literature, and hence deserves to be called 'a veritable Tower of Babel',<sup>1</sup> so more obviously does modern Shakespeare criticism; the variety and, at times, the clash of critical voices and 'languages' are most readily perceived here. Three distinct trends, schools or movements can be isolated in modern Shakespeare commentary, and a threefold classification of critics into historical, theatrical and poetic can be made.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New York and London, 1963), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Other modes of classification have been employed. Alan S. Downer, 'The Life of our Design', *Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism*, edited by L. F. Dean (New York, 1961), p. 19, divides critics into 'the Shakespeare-as-a-poet' ones and 'the Shakespeare-as-a-dramatist' ones. Anne Ridler calls the two groups the 'theatrical' and the 'linguistic', Anne Ridler, ed., *Shakespeare Criticism: 1935-1960* (London, 1963), pp. vii-ix. Allardyce Nicoll, *Shakespeare* (London, 1952), p. 49, distinguishes between the school of romantic criticism of which Coleridge is father, and which considers Shakespeare's works as divorced from their age and original theatre, and the school which concerns itself with the

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poetic interpretation of Shakespeare might be called the trend of twentieth-century Shakespeare criticism, and in this book I am concerned with the contribution of this school, especially of some of its leading exponents,<sup>3</sup> and the interrelations between it and other schools of Shakespeare criticism.

For the sake of perspective, any study of this dominant school of Shakespeare criticism in this century should start with an account of the other main approaches. I will attempt to indicate the general outlines of the theory, explicit or implicit, behind these approaches to Shakespeare, and of the methods generally adopted. Such a chart will give us a historical angle of vision, from which it becomes clear that the developments in other schools fostered a climate congenial to the emergence and vogue of poetic criticism. What is more, the relation between the poetic school and the historical school, and the poetic school and the theatrical school, is not one of simple rivalry or opposition, but rather one of unconscious collaboration. Behind the surface

Elizabethan Shakespeare. He also divides critics into 'Bradleyites' concerned with the conventions of the Elizabethan stage (p. 52). Kenneth Muir 'Fifty years of Shakespearian Criticism', *Shakespeare Survey*, 4 (1951), uses categories such as 'Bradley and Bradleyites', 'Approaches to Shakespeare', 'Disintegration and Reintegration', 'Scholarship and Criticism', 'Realism and Convention', and 'Imagery, Symbolism and liberty of interpreting'. L. D. Lerner, in the introduction to *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism* (Harmondsworth, 1963), sees approaches to Shakespeare in the present century in terms of Aristotle's six elements of drama – plot, character, diction, thought, music, and spectacle (p. 10).

<sup>3</sup> I have given detailed attention to only a few of the critics. J. Middleton Murry, William Empson, Derek A. Traversi and Robert B. Heilman merit study on the lines pursued here. A response to the poetic-dramatic constituents of the plays has become a characteristic of competence in the commentator or scholar, thanks to the impact of the poetic interpreters.

The contributions of Murry and Empson are substantial, individual and influential. No adequate consideration can be attempted in the compass of this study. Two general observations are worth making. There is an evolution in Empson's commentaries and to an extent in Murry's, towards greater use of historical findings, and thus towards greater interplay between historical scholarship and critical insight. In his later essays and books (*The Structure of Complex Words* (London, 1951) and *Milton's God* (London 1961)), Empson employs methods of character-criticism in conjunction with semantic analysis, and speculates about the likely response of the original audience of the plays ('Hamlet When New', *Sewanee Review*, 61 (1953), 15–42, 185–205), thus ostensibly restoring plays to their theatrical context; but his reconstructions are often too modernistic and speculative.

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appearance of antagonism, there has been a dialogue and fruitful meeting-ground. To call attention to this does not blur basic differences or take refuge in historical determinism or inevitability, but promotes awareness that our apprehension of Shakespeare today consists of a synthesis achieved both by scholarship and by criticism. What might strike the reader as a pattern of reaction and revolt against convention is rather one of continuity and adaptation, or at least one of challenge and response. Such is the relation of the poetic school with the other schools of modern Shakespeare criticism.

The two other major schools (I will comment on minor categories later) are evidently those of the historical critics and the theatrical critics. Because of the over-general nature of these terms, further division of these categories will be useful: such divisions can be made partly from a chronological, and partly from a methodological point of view.

Certain general characteristics of the whole historical school may first be identified. A number of interpreters who use the findings of historical scholarship about the background and conventions of the Elizabethan age (there is hardly any aspect which has not been enquired into) are customarily brought together under this category. This was a major trend until the twenties and the thirties, and it is only natural that the findings of historical scholarship have been assimilated and reapplied by other critical schools. But the historical critics proper make it a principle of interpretation that Shakespeare's art is determined rather than conditioned by the background of his age and culture. Now that our historical knowledge about almost every epoch of literature of the past and about the Elizabethan era in particular is so considerable, it is axiomatic that the age conditions, to some extent, govern the writer and his work. What one needs to remember now is not so much how Shakespeare is best approached as 'the Elizabethan Shakespeare' in his original context as how, for all that he was 'the soul of the age', he is, after all, 'for all time'. We have to remember that the great writer in both subtle and obvious ways transcends the age, and questions, directly or obliquely, its commonplace assumptions. The crucial question is

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whether the historical sense of the reader should inform his apprehension of the work of Shakespeare or of any classic, or whether historical knowledge intervenes at a subsequent stage, after the reader's personal response to the work, with his modern consciousness uncorrupted by historical conditioning.<sup>4</sup> In any case, making due allowance for Shakespeare's essential universality as we apply historical data to interpretation calls for the exercise of the commentator's critical sense, perception and tact and not a rigid adherence to historical principles. There is the further issue of deciding upon the kinds and degrees of relevance of numerous backgrounds or even resolving contradictions among them.

If we are to discuss the theory of modern historical criticism of Shakespeare, we need first to subdivide this group into categories. First, I distinguish between those pure historical scholars whose research simply produces information or legitimate conjectures, and those who apply these findings to interpretation. It is with the second group that we are concerned.

Among them are those who interpret or criticise the plays in terms of what they consider to be the expectations and response of the original Elizabethan audiences, and their taste and cultural calibre. Others proceed on assumptions about the 'primitive' structure and conventions of Elizabethan drama, and explain problems of the plays in these terms. There are those who interpret Shakespearian drama in the light of their knowledge of social and economic conditions in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England. We also have writers who base their interpretation of plays on their idea of the intellectual and cultural climate of the age, or on its elements such as medieval and Renaissance concepts, assumptions about 'the Elizabethan world-picture', Elizabethan psychology, pneumatology, demonology and superstitions, popular cultural traditions, Christian religious and theological beliefs, ethical and homiletic teachings, and structures of ideas. Other critics examine the plays in the light of the large body of knowledge which has now been

<sup>4</sup> Discussed in chapter 5 (pp. 151–3), especially in connection with L. C. Knights's 'Historical Scholarship and the Interpretation of Shakespeare', *SR* 63 (1955), 223–40 and John Lawlor's reply, *SR*, 64 (1956), 186–206.

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gathered about medieval and Renaissance, or native and neoclassical, literary and dramatic theories, practices and conventions, or the concepts of 'kinds' and genres available in the Elizabethan age. Some commentators relate the plays, their characters and situations, to the life of Shakespeare, to people he knew or events he lived through, providing counterparts in Elizabethan England. Those who see topical references in Shakespeare occupy a common ground between this category and the approach through social and economic findings. We have interpretations based on findings about the extent and nature of Shakespeare's education, reading and learning; just as we have interpretations which relate the plays to their plot-sources, direct as well as secondary, and to sources of individual passages, ideas and images. To the same broad subdivision belong commentators who trace influences of various kinds, such as the influence of the Bible, the Homilies, the Emblem-books, and proverb-lore; the influence on Shakespeare of his predecessors and of contemporary poets and playwrights, and the influence of thinkers such as Montaigne and Machiavelli. Among the historical critics must be placed 'the disintegrators', with their conviction about the many hands involved in Shakespearian drama. It is here too that the bibliographical critics belong. Then we have the linguistic critics. The approach advocated by the Neo-Aristotelian critics is also related to historical scholarship. Allied in one respect to these, but distinct from them, is the group of 'plot' and 'structure' analysts.

The rise of something like a historical sense, can be traced back to the Shakespeare criticism of Dryden and Johnson. It is a kind of historical sense which manifests itself in Dryden's insistence on the greater refinement and superiority of his own age over the Elizabethan, which was, from his point of view, though one of the 'giant race before the Flood', also one of barbarians with 'uncharter'd freedom'. This prejudiced picture of the Elizabethan age and its taste has endured in some quarters from Dryden's day to this. Yet however inadequately or falsely conceived the historical sense of critics like Dryden and Johnson might be, they did have one. Johnson's commentary on Shakespeare is remarkable among other things for this evidence of historical consciousness.

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In the eighteenth century, that period of pioneer Shakespearean editing and scholarship, editors could exhibit a historical sense especially in their annotation. In the latter half of the century the first foundations of systematic Elizabethan and Shakespearean scholarship can be said to have been laid. The names of Steevens and Malone claim our respect.<sup>5</sup> Malone's pioneering work gave a new direction and bearing to Shakespeare studies. The lead given by the late-eighteenth-century scholar-editors was not pursued properly by critics for more than half a century, and it was fairly late in the nineteenth century before it developed on a recognisable scale. This gap in the evolution of modern Elizabethan and Shakespearean scholarship is sad; especially when we remember that it coincided with the Romantic period, a period of major shifts of focus in Shakespeare criticism, and in which a general love and enthusiasm for the Elizabethan age and its literature was part of the Romantic cult. It is a matter of regret that Coleridge and Hazlitt, Lamb and De Quincey, could not make contact with the tradition of scholarship established before their time by Malone, Capell and Steevens. Coleridge was in principle indifferent to, and at times deliberately opposed to, the findings of scholarship, as in the case of Malone's chronology of Shakespeare's plays. It is a nice point to decide whether the Romantics' extreme universalisation of Shakespeare and their treatment of the plays in a timeless context, divorced from his age and theatre, arise from or lead to the lack of a continuing tradition of scholarship. The roots of modern historical scholarship about Shakespeare and the Elizabethan age lie, like the roots of modern literary scholarship in general, in the latter half of the nineteenth century; it was this age which saw the elevation of Shakespeare to a school and later a college and university text, his aggrandisement as national institution and symbol. Yet even A. C. Bradley, in his *Shakespearian Tragedy* (London, 1904, 1957) seems deliberately to have shut himself off

<sup>5</sup> J. Isaacs, 'Shakespeare Criticism, From Dryden to Coleridge', *A Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Harley Granville-Barker and G. B. Harrison (Cambridge, 1934); Arthur Brown, *Edmond Malone and English Scholarship* (London, 1963); S. K. Sen, *Capell and Malone, and Modern Critical Bibliography* (Calcutta, 1960) and O. Hood Phillips, *Shakespeare and the Lawyers* (London, 1972), pp. 142–4.

from the Elizabethan scholarship of his day, and made only fitful contact with it in some of his occasional essays.<sup>6</sup>

The systematic application of historical findings to the interpretation of secular literature is a characteristic twentieth-century development. It is customary to see the rise of the historical criticism of Shakespeare in the various modes outlined above as one of the two chief ways of reacting against the Romantic, nineteenth-century, unhistorical or a-historical criticism of Shakespeare, the main representative of which was A. C. Bradley; the other mode of reaction being 'the New Criticism' or the poetic interpretation of Shakespeare. On closer examination, we see that historical criticism looks like a reaction mainly because the pioneering critics of this school in the early decades of the twentieth century found in Bradley an easy target to attack, since he happened to be the leading Shakespearian immediately preceding them. When we examine the basic premises of the post-Bradleyan critics, and their ulterior conception of the Shakespeare play, or the framework of their approaches to it, we find that these are so radically different from those of Bradley, that the question of reaction is scarcely appropriate, where there is so little contact.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A. C. Bradley, 'Shakespeare's Theatre and Audience' in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1909), 'Monosyllabic Lines and Words in English Verse and Prose' and 'Scene Endings in Shakespeare and in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*' in *A Miscellany* (London, 1929), and 'The locality of *King Lear*, Act 1 Scene II', *Modern Language Review*, 4 (1909), 238–40. Katharine Cooke, *A. C. Bradley and His Influence in Twentieth-Century Shakespeare Criticism* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 72–3 and *passim*, comments on Bradley's response to scholarship, and his occasional academic research. Among Bradley's mss. preserved in Balliol College Library is a notebook listing Shakespeare's words beginning with 'A', Katharine Cooke (p. 72) adds 'their purpose quite obscure'. Possibly Bradley thought of compiling a concordance improving on Bartlett.

Katharine Cooke shows that Bradley was a regular theatre-goer. In his approach to Shakespeare he was not anti-theatrical, still less anti-poetic. Wilson Knight has made plain that he considered his 'spatial' interpretation a continuation and extension of Bradley's response. Bradley was associated in 1906–7 with Gilbert Murray and Granville-Barker in the cause of the establishment of a National Theatre as a Shakespeare memorial. 'Soon after Barker joined forces with Archer, a meeting was held at Spenser Wilkinson's house to plan a strategy to enlist supporters; in attendance were Gilbert Murray (1866–1957), A. C. Bradley (1851–1935), Hamilton Fyfe (1869–1951), Wilkinson, Barker, and Archer' (George B. Bryan, 'Lady Randolph Churchill and the National Theatre', *Theatre Survey*, 15 (1974), 144).

<sup>7</sup> R. S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto, 1953), p. 26 makes this point.

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Once the foundations of historical scholarship in Shakespeare studies had been laid in the second half of the nineteenth century, attention was directed to the Elizabethan audiences which, in one view, conditioned or determined the nature of Shakespearean drama. Robert Bridges<sup>8</sup> isolated what he thought to be faults and defects in the plays: improbabilities of plot and inconsistencies of characterisation, lack of taste evidenced in 'bad jokes and foolish verbal trifling', 'extreme badness of passages', 'scenes which offend our feelings'. He attributed these defects to Shakespeare's willingness to yield to the demands of his audience, to give the public what it wanted and to play, not so much to the gallery as to the pit. It is worth recalling that a prejudiced, because superior, view of the Elizabethan audience was common in Shakespeare criticism as seen in incidental references in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For that matter, the opinions expressed by Elizabethan dramatists themselves, and surprisingly by both public-theatre and private-theatre playwrights, are none too complimentary to their audiences, though Shakespeare seems to have known better than his peers. Some Victorian critics of Shakespeare – Dowden, Swinburne and Lounsbury, for instance – occasionally noted the bearing of audience expectation and response on Shakespearean drama, and some Victorian scholars (like Malone in the eighteenth century) speculated about the nature of Elizabethan audiences.

The contribution of Bridges has been to make the consideration of the nature and demands of the audience and their influence on the dramatist into a systematic, though tacit, principle of critical judgement. Studies of the original audiences for works of literature have proliferated in the twentieth century, and the relation between writer and audience is now a major focus of interest in literary criticism, especially in the study of modern literature.<sup>9</sup> The positive result of Bridges's approach has been to underline the need for awareness of the nature, taste and response of

<sup>8</sup> Robert Bridges, 'The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare's Drama' (1907), *Collected Essays* (Oxford, 1927).

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of 'Beowulf'* (1951); Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932); E. D. H. Johnson, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry* (1952); R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (1957); Edwin Muir, *The Estate of Poetry* (1962) are examples of such studies.



audiences. But his reading of the relationship between Shakespeare and his audience cannot be acceptable today. The contemptuous view of the Elizabethan audience current from the eighteenth century onwards reached its culmination in Bridges's condemnation of their bad taste, and his thesis that Shakespeare had to reflect the bad taste of his audience has been thoroughly refuted by a number of modern critics.<sup>10</sup> The main flaw in Bridges's argument was a false image of the Elizabethan audience, built on inadequate or no data, and on age-old prejudice. The composition and taste of Elizabethan audiences had not been properly researched then. Modern Shakespeare scholarship has directed attention to this area and has made available a good deal of information about audiences, the most sensible and conclusive evidence being provided by Alfred Harbage. Yet the older habit of gross underestimation of the general quality of Elizabethan play-goers dies hard and survives to some extent in the twentieth century. One remembers William Archer's strictures on Elizabethan drama and its audience. The counter-stress laid by I. A. Richards and L. C. Knights on the keenness of the Elizabethan ear and sensibility, due to to age-long habits of listening to stories and sermons, and so attesting the persistence of the tradition of oral communication, has at times given the impression of idealising the Elizabethan audience. The result is that, as Harbage put it, 'sometimes distance lends courage also to the idealist, and the Globe is filled with mute inglorious Shakespeares' (*Shakespeare's*

<sup>10</sup> G. Wilson Knight, 'Tolstoy's Attack on Shakespeare', *The Wheel of Fire* (2nd edn, London, 1949), pp. 270–97. J. I. M. Stewart, *Character and Motive in Shakespeare* (London, 1949), chapter 2, 'Falstaff on Boar's Hill', pp. 11–39, and Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* (New York, 1941) and *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (1952).

In his first book Harbage shows that the audience at the Globe was a cross-section of the Elizabethan community. Ann Jennaline Cook, 'The Audience of Shakespeare's Plays: A Reconsideration', *Shakespeare Studies*, 7 (1974), 283–305, has questioned the accuracy of this. In his second book, in his over-eagerness to make a case for the soundness of taste of the audiences in the public theatres, Harbage makes too schematic a distinction between the audiences of the public and private theatres. In *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (p.291), Harbage says of Bridges's strictures on Shakespeare's audiences: 'Possibly the most mistaken single utterance ever made about Shakespearean drama came from Robert Bridges'.

Mention may be made of Martin Holmes, *Shakespeare's Public: The Touchstone of his Genius* (London, 1959), where the author tries to reconstruct the probable response of the original audiences.

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*Audience*, p. 138). This reaction against the older prejudice veers to the other extreme.

The importance of audience-participation in drama, indirectly in its making and directly in its staging, can hardly be gainsaid. But Bridges's lopsided emphasis on the influence of the audience was the result of a naïve understanding of the triangular relationship between writer, audience and work. Modern commentators, learning from his example, avoiding his error of emphasis and proceeding upon a more adequate historical reconstruction of the probable response of the original audience, have been able to illuminate a number of plays.<sup>11</sup>

A second approach of historical scholarship is that of critics who deploy the argument about the primitive conventions which inform Shakespearian and Elizabethan drama. At one time in this century these critics had a powerful hold and were looked upon as the chief representatives of historical criticism. They acquired the label of the 'realist school'. Bridges himself is included in this school. His link with these critics is that they, too, assume that Elizabethan audiences were 'primitive' (it is interesting to trace the semantic shift in the word from the more or less pejorative use by Schücking to the more or less commendatory use of Northrop Frye), naïve and gross in their taste. These critics seem to raise the factor of audience-response into a critical principle and base their interpretation partly on Shakespeare's manipulation of it.

Inconsistencies and improbabilities in plot, situation and atmosphere, as well as lack of motivation in character, were thought not to be faults to be avoided but, on the contrary, the stock-in-trade of the popular dramatist. A liberal admixture of these elements were part of the 'primitive' dramatic conventions and structure which were his heritage and gratified the expectations of his audience. Bridges, approaching from a more or less naturalistic point of view, saw these features as faults and blamed them ultimately on the audience; but E. E. Stoll,<sup>12</sup> the most

<sup>11</sup> Moody E. Prior, 'The Elizabethan Audience and the Plays of Shakespeare', *Modern Philology*, 49 (1951-2), 101-23, gives a balanced estimate of the value and limitations of the approach in terms of the probable response of the original audience.

<sup>12</sup> E. E. Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* (1927); *Poets and Playwrights* (1930); *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (1933); *Shakespeare and Other Masters* (1940); *From Shakespeare to*